

FACTSHEET

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Male infant circumcision

Circumcision is not available in public hospitals, including children's hospitals, in NSW. Children's hospitals in NSW, as a part of the NSW Ministry of Health, endorse the 2010 statement of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) on Circumcision of Infant Males <http://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/circumcision-of-infant-males.pdf>

Circumcision may be done for cultural, family or religious reasons. It is rarely needed for medical reasons.

Circumcision is an operation where the foreskin is cut off. The foreskin is the fold of skin that covers the tip of a boy's penis (glans). It extends from the skin that covers the shaft of the penis, and has a thinner and more sensitive inner surface that is attached to the shaft where it joins the glans. As well as its sensitive inner surface, the foreskin protects the tip of the penis. Under the foreskin, the skin of the glans is thin and moist.

When a boy is born, the inner layer of the foreskin is normally stuck to the glans and the foreskin cannot be pulled back (retracted). As the boy grows, the inner skin separates and the opening becomes more elastic so that by the time he is fully grown he

should be able to retract it without discomfort. Some boys can do this by the time they are three to four years of age. Others may not be able to do this until puberty. As the foreskin separates, dead skin cells form collections of white material under the foreskin (smegma) which may look like cysts. This is normal.

Hygiene

With normal personal hygiene, the circumcised penis is no cleaner than the uncircumcised penis.

Urinary tract infection

Some research in North America has shown that boys, who were circumcised as small babies, have less chance of developing urinary tract infections in the first year of life, than those who are uncircumcised (there is no difference in older boys). However, the numbers of uncircumcised boys who will get urinary infections is small. If 1000 well boys are circumcised, 8 infections will be prevented, but 20 will have a complication related to the circumcision. In those boys with an underlying urinary tract problem, circumcision has been shown to reduce the risk of recurrent urinary tract infections, particularly if still in nappies.

Sexually transmitted diseases

Circumcision does not guarantee protection from infection. Normal safe sex practices must be used to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Penile cancer

Penile cancer is very rare, with an incidence of 1 in 250,000 men in Australia. Circumcision reduces the risk of developing cancer of the penis, however it is very rare in either circumcised or uncircumcised men who practice good hygiene.

Risks of the Circumcision

Circumcision is generally a safe procedure, but there are risks of minor complications and some rare but serious complications, from both the operation and the general anaesthesia.

Some of the minor complications include an infection of the penis, bleeding where the foreskin was removed and poor cosmetic result. Less common but serious complications include damage to the tip of the penis, loss of the penis, or even death.

If you would like more information, talk to your doctor or paediatrician about the risks and benefits of circumcision.

The Australian and New Zealand Association of Paediatric Surgeons (ANZAPS), the Australasian Urological Society and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) believe that newborn baby boys and young infants do not need to be circumcised, unless there is a medical reason.

If however, if you would like your boy circumcised, it is better performed after six to 12 months of age by an experienced surgeon, under general anaesthetic given by a suitably trained anaesthetist. Your boy should receive the right care, including medicine for pain relief and safe management of complications, should they occur.

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Circumcision for medical reasons

Very few boys need circumcision for medical reasons. However, recurrent infections under the foreskin (balanitis), or abnormal tightness of the foreskin (phimosis) may lead to the operation being recommended. If you think that your boy has a medical reason for circumcision, discuss this with your doctor. Usually foreskin problems can be treated without the need for an operation.

Summary

Ethical and human rights concerns have been raised regarding routine infant male circumcision. This is because it is recognised that the foreskin has a functional role, the operation is non-therapeutic and that the infant is unable to consent.

After reviewing the currently available evidence, the Sydney Children's Hospital Network and the RACP believe that the risks of routine male circumcision outweigh the benefits and that therefore baby boys should not routinely be circumcised. It is however, reasonable for parents to weigh the benefits and risks of circumcision, and to make the decision of whether or not to circumcise their boys.

Remember:

- Circumcision is not available in public hospitals, including children's hospitals, in NSW.
- Circumcision is rarely needed for medical reasons. There are often other treatments available.